

## I. OVERVIEW

The purpose of this report is to establish a central website to collect data from States about the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). This report is a follow-up to Wittenburg, et al. (2001), which included a summary of ten data collection/enhancement initiatives that have the potential to improve the utility and cost-effectiveness of research on federal food assistance and nutrition programs. Economic Research Service (ERS) selected three initiatives from that report for further development. This report, along with Wittenburg, et al. (2001) and Bell (2001), provide a specific implementation plan, including potential costs, benefits, and alternative options, for the three initiatives selected by ERS.

This initiative proposes to establish a central website to collect data from States about the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP), which together served approximately 34 million children daily in FY2000 at a cost of approximately \$7 billion<sup>1</sup>. Data would be collected at the School Food Authority level (i.e., these are typically school districts) and would include information about the characteristics of participating SFAs and students. In addition to serving as a data collection point, the proposed website will be used to disseminate resulting databases, summary reports, and articles.

A phased approach is suggested, which will query state-level contacts to obtain SFA-level data and gradually increase the respondent pool and expand the nature of the data being collected, as much as is feasible. Although States cannot be required to participate, FNS could tie participation to program funding to encourage compliance. However, some considerations weigh against mandating participation, at least in the early stages of this initiative. After this initiative has been piloted, FNS may need to consider additional rulemaking to require states' participation in order for the database to be representative. The first phase of implementation will include the design of the website, identification of state-level contacts (i.e., "respondents") for approximately 20 states, and collection of data from an initial set of nine states. A core set of data elements will be identified and collected from these state contacts, and initial reports to be posted on the web will be designed. Subsequent phases of the initiative will include the expansion of the respondent base to incorporate additional states, a possible expansion of the data collection requests to include school-level data, and the development of a school food authorities contact list to which web-based queries will be directed. This initiative provides an initial framework upon which relevant stakeholders—including the Education Information Advisory Council (EIAC), States, the American School Food Service Association (ASFSa), and USDA—can build; it must be recognized that part of this initiative is an exploration of available data and their potential uses for researchers.

This initiative seeks to capitalize on information routinely collected by state agencies and aggregated across SFAs but not systematically compiled for research use as

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<sup>1</sup> Child Nutrition Web Pages, U.S. Department of Agriculture Website.

a database of SFA-level observations. Often these data become part of higher-order aggregates reported and analyzed as state totals, but the details—easily accessed at the prior step—are then lost. A "data capture" of these local-level aggregates could produce important benefits for the NSLP and SBP, and possibly be extended to the other food assistance and nutrition programs. We acknowledge that this initiative will require states to report more "data fields" than they are currently reporting and that this may increase their reporting burden; however, since states are already required to collect these data to support their aggregate-level reporting requirements, the increase in reporting burden should not be extreme.

A national database that contains data at the SFA level could be used by researchers and program administrators to compare and analyze data across both state and local geographic areas (e.g., school districts or regions). For example, SFAs with similar demographic characteristics would be able to compare percentages of free or reduced-price meals across different grade levels to identify programs with high success rates. SFAs that have lower rates may then be able to identify some of the key elements of success that contribute to higher rates.

Where possible, SFAs would be mapped to school districts, enabling the incorporation of district-level data, such as name, geographic location, size (number of students), and meals served broken out by paid, free, and reduced price categories. The 2000 Census geographic files include school district boundaries, and an initial exploration could be done on the viability of using these linkages. The resulting data could permit characterization of the school districts based on the following factors:

- Degree of poverty (i.e., high vs. low)
- Degree of urbanicity (i.e., urban vs. suburban vs. rural)
- Level of NSLP/SBP participation

The initiative proposes that SFA data<sup>2</sup> be collected for one month each year corresponding to the timing of the states' annual reporting requirement to FNS. While there is much variability in when SFAs report data to the States, part of this initiative will explore the optimal time to request these data. Thus, this initiative seeks to create as much as possible, a point-in-time view of program characteristics and participation of low-income children, providing comparable information that highlights differences across SFAs. The resulting database would contain SFA-level information about children who qualify for free and reduced-price meals, as well as the number of meals served to all children in the SFA.

Users will be able to query the system for information contained in the resulting database or view summary tables, reports, and articles designed to highlight the collected data. At the same time, to keep the information on the website from becoming static, this initiative proposes to periodically download information that is reported by states to the

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<sup>2</sup> As mentioned earlier, subsequent phases of this initiative will potentially expand the number and type of respondents to include survey requests to school district food authorities and requests to states or individual school districts for school-level data.

federal government, such as the aggregated data that go into producing the federally mandated monthly and annual *Reports of School Program Operations*, and incorporate it into the reports and tables posted on the website. This will allow researchers to examine trends in participation at the state level and compare them to local school district demographics. Due to the “phased” nature of the proposed implementation as well as the fact that data collection requests will take place annually (at least initially), it must be noted that it will take several years to create a database that will provide sufficient data to permit longitudinal analyses.